





All in on accountability

During the year the Glynn County Recreation and Parks department plays host to a calendar-packed schedule of travel team tournaments and national competitions at its facilities.

The state-of-the-art complex in south Georgia is a popular destination for youth athletic events, as it is typically packed 40 weekends out of the year by outside groups using its facilities for everything from baseball and softball to soccer.

These weekend invasions of players, parents and coaches from throughout Georgia, as well as other states, infuse millions of dollars into the community.

But their arrival brings all sorts of new challenges for those responsible for overseeing the fields they are competing on, too.

A growing number of youth sports groups, from travel teams to national tournaments, are renting parks and recreation department facilities around the country to stage their events. While their arrival provides a financial boost for the community it's also accompanied by the challenges of keeping coaches, parents and spectators unfamiliar with the local recreation department's philosophy in line. How prepared is your department?



So while restaurants, motels and gas stations reap the benefits at the cash register, park and recreation professionals are faced with the ever challenging assignment of keeping close tabs on coaches and spectators to ensure that their behavior meshes with their program's philosophy and doesn't stray from meeting the needs of the young participants competing at their facility.

"We hold them accountable," says Steve Mellinger, program manager of the Glynn County Recreation and Parks department. "They know exactly what we expect out of them. We supervise 100 percent of those tournaments with our own staff."

DANGER ZONE

Youth tournaments are oftentimes a combustible mixture of win-conscious coaches and overly exu-

berant fans pushing, prodding and resorting to just about any means necessary to help their teams collect wins and avoid the dreaded early tournament exit.

Consequently, one perceived bad call, or comment from the opposing side, can spark riot-like conditions and require police intervention.

For example, at a youth baseball tournament in California recently a coach sucker punched an umpire and was promptly booked into the county jail on charges of battery against a sports official; in Edmonton, dozens of players representing three teams at a youth baseball tournament, along with several parents and coaches, were part of a massive brawl while a fourth team sought refuge in the dugout from the flying fists; and in Ontario at a youth hockey tournament for 8-year-olds

players and coaches engaged in a brawl during a game that resulted in the suspension of half a dozen players and two coaches.

It's a scenario that anyone who allows outside groups to use its park and recreation department's facilities fears most – and the repercussions of such an incident occurring are gigantic.

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What's your take?

We want to know how your department deals with outside user groups at your facility. Has it been problem-free or hassle-filled? Let us know what has worked for you so that other departments can benefit, too. Drop us a line at sportingkid@nays.org.



Between the liability aspect of someone being injured during a fracas to the accompanying embarrassment of having the incident covered in the news and splashed across the internet, it's easy to see why accountability is the watchword when it comes to recreation agencies turning over their facilities to outside groups of coaches, spectators and players that they aren't familiar with.

"We have a nice complex and they understand that if things get out of hand they can lose the chance to use our facility and we have done that before," says Mellinger, who sees more than 20,000 participants from outside the community annually participate in various tournaments at his facility. "We've had people come in affiliated with some national programs

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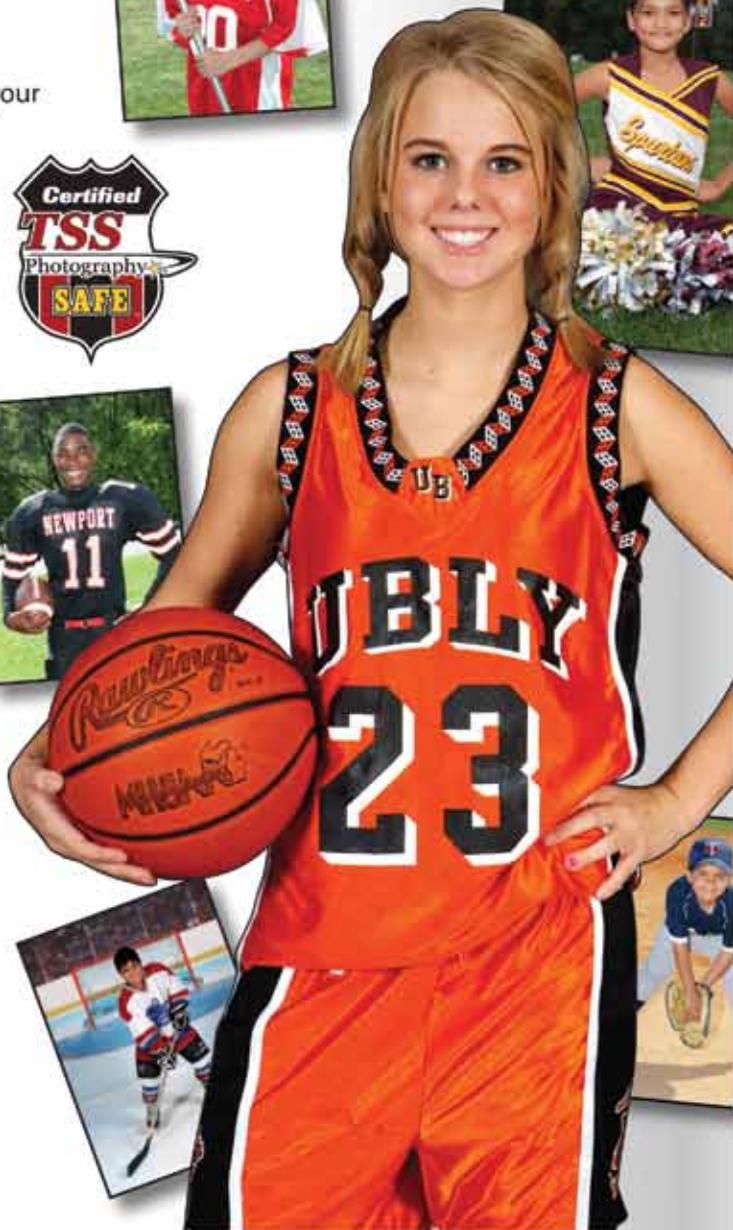
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but the tournament director associated with that program didn't run a good program and they found out real quick when it was taken away from them and they had to go somewhere else. Some of them have burned so many bridges now that they are pretty much out of business – and they need to be.”

Oconee County (Ga.) Parks and Recreation is equally diligent when it comes to protecting the interests of young players participating on its fields from outside agencies, as its outside user groups range from lacrosse and tennis to select soccer and

NYSCA coach training and we will pay for that if they would like to utilize that program. So we offer that service to them as part of our partnership with those user groups.”

The department also strongly recommends that all user groups conduct criminal history checks on coaches, instructors and any other individuals directly working with program participants.

Similar policies are in place at the City of McAllen Parks and Recreation in Texas.

“Groups are required to be affiliated with a national governing body,”

says Richard Krauss, the superintendent of recreation there. “All coaches must have background checks on file as well as have attended a sport-specific coaches course from organizations such as the National Alliance for Youth Sports.”

PROTECTIVE LAYERS

It's a common theme throughout the youth sports industry: The more protective measures that are in place the less likely problems will surface that force departments to remove individuals or pull the plug on games or tournaments.

“I believe that the use of any facility is a privilege and that they should be respected and treated as if they were your own home.”

– Barbara Mann, the recreation director at the Cresskill Recreation department in New Jersey

baseball. Its 18-page Policies and Procedures manual for user groups hits on all the important areas relevant to ensuring safe and successful experiences for all participants.

The department also mandates each user group has all its sports coaches attend training and achieve certification by a nationally recognized sports coaches association. National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA) clinics are conducted by the Oconee County staff seasonally for each sport.

“We have a lengthy agreement on requirements that user groups have to fulfill, one of which is that their coaches have to go through a national coach training program, and we do not specify what that program is,” says Lisa Davol, deputy director of programs for Oconee County Parks and Recreation. “However, we do offer for them to go through the



“A parks and recreation department must be thorough when considering whether or not to lease its fields to an outside organization,” says Peter Coleman, recreation supervisor for the Town of Lexington (Mass.). “If they are not already in place the department should establish special rules and requirements that the organization must adhere to in order to offer a special event in that town. Once established, it is critical for the department to make sure that all of the requirements are being met prior to officially approving the organization’s request.”

Furthermore, parks and recreation departments always hold the ultimate trump card – access to their facilities – when it comes to policing behavior at events and maintaining that everyone’s actions are in line with its youth sports philosophy.

At Glynn County, staff patrol the fields to make certain that no child’s experience is derailed by any adult’s inappropriate behavior.

“We react right away,” Mellinger says. “When we see a coach or parent get out of hand our staff moves right in and pulls them to the side and tells them that we aren’t going to tolerate that.”

Of course, sometimes that message doesn’t always get through and more aggressive steps are required.

“Every two or three years we’ll have somebody who just doesn’t get it and gets belligerent and we’ll give them an opportunity to either calm down or we’ll have to ask them to leave,” Mellinger explains. “Occasionally, there will be someone who wants to test the waters, but our staff is trained and we don’t even deal with it. They pick up the phone and call the police department, which is familiar with our program and what we are trying to do and they come right out and escort them away. That sends a bigger signal because now everyone else sees that we are not going to tolerate it. As long as you have the backbone and

LEVEL PLAYING FIELD: Reynoldsburg Parks and Recreation holds all field users to identical standard

By Linda Alberts

To the City of Reynoldsburg’s (Ohio) Park and Recreation department, accountability doesn’t only apply to the volunteers of the leagues that they manage, but for any outside sports organization that walks onto their fields, including travel teams and clubs.

“In order to ensure that a quality program is being operated, our department holds volunteers of outside organizations to the same standards as our own,” says Jason Gandee, recreation supervisor for Reynoldsburg Parks and Recreation.



Like the volunteer coaches of the Reynoldsburg Parks and Recreation department, coaches of outside organizations are required to complete certification through the National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA), which prepares them for the responsibility of coaching through an education on topics such as the psychology of coaching youth sports, communication, child abuse, injury prevention, nutrition and hydration.

It’s not uncommon for Reynoldsburg staff to actively participate in an outside sports organization’s programs in roles ranging from attending board meetings to facilitating situations that arise.

“When an organization is reviewing their bylaws, we recommend a board position for parks and recreation,” Gandee says. “In most cases, it can be nonvoting.”

This type of involvement encourages communication between the two organizations and ensures that Reynoldsburg’s youth sport philosophy remains front and center on their fields.

While each outside sports organization has their own staff and policies in place, Reynoldsburg Parks and Recreation department doesn’t tolerate unacceptable behavior.

It is the outside sports organization’s responsibility to resolve the issue internally, but if the issue is not corrected the department will step in.

“If there is an issue that is brought to our department’s attention, we would contact the executive board [of the outside organization] and follow up to make sure it is addressed and resolved,” Gandee says. “If there is a formal complaint lodged with NAYS we would assist with the investigation and hearing.”

you take care of it right away everyone is going to see that, but the minute you start slipping and don’t do anything you are in trouble.”

“I believe that the use of any facility is a privilege and that they should be respected and treated as if they were your own home,” adds Barbara Mann, the recreation director at the Cresskill Recreation department in New Jersey.

Inappropriate conduct that results in the termination of those coveted field use contracts forces tournament directors to look for a new site next year – and that threat is often enough motivation to ensure that no one affiliated with their tournament steps out of line.

“You’re either going to behave or you’re not, and if you’re not you’re going to leave,” Mellinger says. ✨